



*The closure of this nuclear facility in the 1980s left California with two operating nuclear plants, San Onofre and Diablo Canyon. Rancho Seco, near Sacramento, with photovoltaic solar panels.*





## ● MEETING TAXPAYER NEEDS

**T**he Board of Equalization's commitment to efficient and responsive taxpayer service helps California businesses and individuals properly comply with the state's complex and changing tax laws. The agency offers a full range of options tailored to address the diverse needs of the state's business population—from 24-hour electronic services to personal assistance with individual tax compliance questions.

### **Enhancing Taxpayer Services**

Since establishing its Customer and Taxpayer Services Division in 1995, the Board has continued to enhance the services available to taxpayers, tax practitioners, and the general public.

#### **Information Center: 800-400-7115**

In 2000-01, the Board's central Information Center received nearly 674,000 calls from taxpayers and tax practitioners. Caller wait time averaged less than 90 seconds and callers selected automated services 36 percent of the time. The Center's automated services include a fax-back service for selected forms and publications and an interactive seller's permit verification service (also available on the agency website).

#### **Internet Site: [www.boe.ca.gov](http://www.boe.ca.gov)**

This year the agency adopted the governor's web standards for Americans with Disabilities Act compliance, which required a complete redesign of the agency's 3,500 web pages. By the end of 2000-01, more than half of the site had been converted to the new format, with total completion projected for December 2001. In addition, staff added new features to the site, expanded the scope and amount of available information, and improved site navigation.

## Taxpayer Education

### Classes, Seminars, and Presentations

**Sales and use tax classes.** During the year, more than 2,700 taxpayers took advantage of basic sales and use tax and tax return preparation classes offered by Board field offices.

**Motor carrier classes.** The Board provided specialized tax training to more than 850 motor carriers and agents this fiscal year. In addition, Board staff participated in “Industry Days” hosted by the California Highway Patrol at several CHP truck scale facilities, providing classes on motor carrier travel between the U.S. and Mexico.

**Speakers bureau.** The Board’s sales and use tax field offices continued outreach to business groups by providing speakers for professional society and industry meetings.

**Small business days.** In 2000-01, the Board cooperated with federal, state, and local agencies in nine all-day events that brought important tax compliance information to nearly 3,100 taxpayers and tax practitioners throughout the state.

### Publications and Media

**Publications and newsletters.** Board staff updated and created a number of publications this year. A new *Offers in Compromise* brochure was written for taxpayers who are unable to pay the full amounts they owe on closed-out accounts, and a new *Homeowner and Renter Assistance Appeals* publication provides a clear explanation of the appeals process and an easy-to-use appeal form. Four periodic tax newsletters with a combined circulation of nearly one million readers continued providing timely information on changes in law and regulations as well as guidance for specific

transactions and activities. For a [full list](#) of publications and newsletters, see the Appendix.

**Translated publications.** The Board translated a number of publications into Spanish in 2000-01, including eight single-sheet sales and use Tax Facts, sales and use tax filing instructions, the *Guide to Board of Equalization Services*, and a property exemption claims form used by county assessors’ offices. A new, introductory sales tax pamphlet, *Making Sales in California*, was published in June 2001 in Arabic, Armenian, Filipino, German, Portuguese, and Punjabi. Translated publications are included in the [publications list](#) in the Appendix.

**Special notices.** 2000-01 special notices alerted taxpayers to the statewide reduction in the sales tax rate (see “Highlights,” [page 12](#)) and changes in special district sales tax rates. Additional notices addressed significant changes in other areas of tax law.

**News releases.** The Board’s Media Office issued nearly 60 press releases during the year and responded to numerous daily phone inquiries from the press.

## Taxpayer Assistance

### Interpreter Services

Recognizing the importance of helping all California taxpayers comply with the law, the Board provides services in languages other than English, offering interpreters in headquarters units, in field offices, and for Board hearings. The Board’s Equal Employment Opportunity Office uses annual language surveys to maintain a list of bilingual and multilingual employees. The list currently includes more than 180 employees who together speak



*Active and passive solar features are popular again in California homes, harkening back to the early 20th century, when the sun provided hot water for many Californians.*

25 different languages and dialects, including American Sign Language. More than 100 employees receive a bilingual pay differential because they regularly use their language skills in assisting taxpayers.

### **Telephone Survey**

To determine whether taxpayers are aware of the services provided by the Board in languages other than English, staff conducted a telephone survey of business and industry associations, chambers of commerce, lobbyists, employers, government entities, and other selected organizations. The agency is using the results of the survey to improve outreach to California's multilingual population.

## **Taxpayers' Bill of Rights**

### **Activities and Hearings**

The Board's Taxpayers' Rights Advocate coordinates the agency's compliance with the California Taxpayers' Bills of Rights and publishes annual reports for business and property taxes. In addition, the Advocate's Office sponsors annual hearings to allow taxpayers to bring their concerns directly to the elected Board Members. Taxpayers may comment on all Board-administered revenue programs as well as local property tax issues. In 2000, public hearings were held in Culver City and Sacramento.

The Board has taken the following actions as a result of specific contacts from taxpayers, issues raised at the Taxpayers' Bill of Rights hearings, and issues identified by the Advocate's Office:

- **Security requirements.** The minimum security requirements were modified to conform with the minimum lien threshold of \$2,000.
- **Levy notification.** To ensure that taxpayers are given timely notification when the Board issues a levy, the time to serve the taxpayer has been defined as three days from the date of mailing to the financial institution, with a maximum of five days allowed under unusual circumstances.
- **Partnership notification of liabilities.** To improve communication with taxpayers, Board staff modified notification procedures to ensure compliance with the Revised Uniform Partnership Act. For example, the Board now bills the partnership entity at its business address or other address of record while also billing the individual partners at their addresses.
- **Personal guarantees.** Procedures have been changed to instruct staff to review personal guarantees for release after three years. If the security will not be released, staff is required to contact the guarantor to verify the information on the guarantee.
- **Permit registration (cross-referencing Board programs).** The Sales and Use Tax Department revised its audit documents to prompt sales tax auditors to ask pertinent questions to determine whether a taxpayer should be registered for the underground storage tank maintenance fee program.
- **Customer satisfaction surveys.** The Taxpayers' Rights Advocate's Office developed a survey

and procedure to determine the level of taxpayer satisfaction with its case work. In addition, the Board translated the *How Are We Doing?* questionnaire to accommodate Spanish-speaking taxpayers.

- **Effective dates of restitution payments.** Taxpayers ordered to pay restitution to the Board make the payments through their county, which in turn remits the payments to the Board. Procedures have been modified to clarify that the effective date of payment is the date of payment to the county.
- **Ex parte communications.** The Board instructed the auditors and attorneys who represent the agency as appeals conference holders to refrain from meeting or communicating with tax program department representatives immediately before and after the conference in order to avoid any appearance of impropriety.

### Evaluating Public Contacts

To ensure quality service while meeting the requirements of the original Taxpayers' Bill of Rights, Board managers and supervisors observe and evaluate the public contact skills of Board employees. All Board employee performance reports and annual reviews must include the supervisor's comments regarding the employee's public contacts, whether made in person, in writing, or by telephone.

In addition, supervisors observe audit staff as they meet with taxpayers to discuss audit procedures or findings. The Board does not evaluate individual officers or employees on the amount of revenue they assess or collect.



The Board's Sales and Use Tax Department gathers taxpayer comments regarding the agency's registration and account maintenance services. In 2000-01, the department received more than 14,700 responses to comment surveys. More than 97 percent of the respondents were pleased with the overall process and with the services delivered by Board staff. When individuals express dissatisfaction or make complaints, the Board makes every attempt to contact them and address the issues raised.

Overall, taxpayers seem satisfied with the quality of service they receive and the professionalism and courtesy extended to them by Board staff. The agency receives many unsolicited letters each year from taxpayers who write to thank staff for their assistance.



*Biomass from timber harvest powers a cogeneration plant at a lumber mill. Wheelabrator Shasta power plant.*